WILLIAM MEIKLE
BURDENS

The Burdens
By
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—Day 1—

I never expected to wake up with my burdens bearing down on me—but it all happened so fast that I didn't have time to think.

I came up out of darkness and felt a tug at my clothes, like an insistent cat trying to get my attention. That insistence turned quickly to something more forceful, as if not one, but a score of beasts were pulling at me, intent on ripping me limb from limb. And finally, I got the message. I woke up fully. I had a sword in my hand and something to strike at—black wings, red eyes and claws like iron nails were all that I saw as I hacked and slashed and screamed until the things went away and left me alone.

As I said, I never expected them. Then again, I never expected to wake up in the first place. I was dead. Flat-lined and gone. The last I'd heard was Annie telling the docs to turn the machines off, and the last I felt was a breath leaving me, like a cool breeze on a shore. I was ready. I closed my eyes.

I wasn't expecting harps, angels and all that happy shit—I've never been much for the Holy Roller nonsense—be nice or the bad fairy in the sky will punish you wasn't my idea of a moral philosophy. I wasn't expecting to see much of anything. And then I was here—wherever the fuck here is. I woke in a high place, at the topmost point of an ancient tower, a tall spire of black weathered stone that fell away below me in a long dizzy stretch of wall into depths filled with swirling fog. Sometimes the fog shifted enough for me to see the main body of the castle itself, impossibly far below—a sprawling, decayed edifice, seemingly empty of anyone but me; there were no lights, no movement, no sound save the screeching of the Burdens above. Far to my left a mountain range marched across the skyline, tall and snow covered, jagged peaks like spearheads. To my right a sea shimmered like black oil under a pitted yellow moon far too big for the sky.

And then there are the Burdens; that’s what I've called them, for want of a better name. They're man sized, with wide bat wings ten feet or more across, heads like rodents, and all the charm of an angry polecat. They have no arms, but their feet have an opposable toe that lets them grip at you—one foot holding while the other rakes talons across your flesh—I have three deep welts in my left bicep to show their efficacy. It's just as well I have the sword, for without it I might not have been given time to come fully awake and would have been torn to shreds or tossed, a discarded toy, down into the swirling depths below.

There's were a dozen or more of them up above me, screeching at me while I stood in an alcove I managed to squeeze into—a

modicum of protection, though I suspected it was only the weapon keeping them at bay.

But that's not the worst thing.

I recognized these beasts—I used to doodle them on notebooks during dull lessons, as if the act of putting them on paper might free them from the nightmares they gave me several times a week. That had even worked, for a while, and I hadn't thought about them for years. But now, here they were.

I thought they might have come here with me.

The Burdens spent hours swooping and screeching, sometimes coming almost within reach of the sword, trying to get at me, but as long as I paid attention and was careful to stay in the alcove I was safe.

But I could not stay in that spot forever. I started to sidle out, keeping my back to the wall. The first of them came at me almost immediately, but it was as if the sword anticipated the attack—it came up and thrust forward, spearing the beast in the breast and sending it, wailing all the way, down into the foggy deep.

That made the others wary, and I was able to circumnavigate the parapet around the top of the spire. It was only by pure luck that I found the doorway. I threw myself inside just as the other Burdens launched an attack—luck and the muscles in my arm saved me. My strength does not seem to be fading despite the fact I haven't eaten—or slept—since I got here. I went down several flights of steps and cowered on a small landing, waiting to see what this place would throw at me next.

The Burdens are still out there, talons like nails on blackboard as they screech on the outer walls, trying to get a foothold.

It is cold here—almost frigidly so—and the sword is colder still in my hand, although it feels like it had always been there. Its weight and heft are comforting, despite the fact that I rarely hefted anything heavier than a pen for many years, and the only other sword I can remember was wooden, and broke when I smacked Danny Trinder with it—I was ten at the time.

That sword didn't sing. This one does, a deep drone, like a bass choir that swells occasionally until it fills my head, but is mostly a soothing whisper, something to remind me that I might not be quite alone.

I've now come down three levels from the parapet—levels in which I've found nothing but dust and cold stone. If there were ever any furnishings or comforts here, they have long since gone—I have a feeling that the turret has sat empty for a long, long time.

The only light comes from the huge gibbous moon, which has not moved a jot from its position above the black seas—I'm definitely

not in Kansas anymore. Things scud intermittently across the yellow surface, things that must be impossibly huge to be seen at this distance. I am just glad they are up there and not here in the turret with me, for the winged rat-things are bad enough.

One of the Burdens tried to come through a window earlier—it might have managed it too, if the sword hadn't warned me with a pulse of heat in my palm and a swelling chorus of song in my head. I'd been sitting in a corner—feeling sorry for myself mostly—but even above the song I heard it—a rustle of leathery wings brushing against stone coming from the shadows in the chamber to my right. The noises got louder still as I stood, and the sword leapt in my hand, ready for action. The thing was mostly through as I entered the room. It screamed at me, and I smelled its fetid breath—rotten meat and vomit. The sword screamed back, the choir raised in a shout that felt like joy as I stepped forward and brought the weapon round, an overhead swing that felt as natural as breathing. The blade hit where the thing's neck met the bone and sinew that attached its right wing, and kept going down, through rib cage and internals, exiting in a wash of blood and gore at the beast's left hip. It was dead and still even before I finished the swing.

I wasn't even breathing heavily.

I kicked at the remains, but it was all just dead meat, and I had no need of it, although it did give off the most awful stench, and it started to bubble and seethe, putrefying at an impossible rate. I left it where it lay, and headed back to the stairs and cleaner air. More of the dead thing's brethren screamed and chattered high above me. I hear them move in the corridor, their winds rustling against the walls, talons scraping on the steps. They are coming after me.

The only way to go is down.

—Day 2—

I have had an audience with the Rat King. I doubt if that's what he calls himself, but he didn't give me his name, so I have made one up—and I think it is apt.

We met on the stairs—he stood on the landing of the seventh level down, as if he was waiting for me. His wings rustled where the leathery skin brushed the walls, and his thin rat-face widened in a grin full of yellow teeth when he saw me. This one was bigger and older than the other Burdens I have seen—broader across the chest, and gray around the whiskers and eyes. His feet were thicker and broader too, allowing him to stand upright, the outstretched wings helping him to balance. I was not fooled though—there were still talons on those broad toes—inches long, black as jet and razor sharp. He saw

me looking and tapped the toes on the ground in a martial drumbeat that rang and echoed in the confines of the landing as he danced a slightly off-balance accompanying jig.

I only guessed he was a king—a crown of silver, a thin band, intricately carved, sat on top of his head, perched somewhat precariously between a pair of pink fleshy ears that twitched as he spoke.

"Well met, my friend," he said. His voice was high pitched and whiny, sounding incongruous, almost comical, coming from such a great barrel of a chest. I nearly laughed, but the sword sent a blast of heat to my palm and the choir sang louder—I got the message—I needed to pay attention.

"You're no friend of mine," I replied, trying to keep my voice even.

He laughed—an even higher pitched thing that sounded almost like a scream.

"Are you sure of that, John?"

The fact that this thing knew my name made by blood run cold, bringing a harsh cold shower of reality into what I'd been hoping was no more than a fever dream. I had no answer to his question, for in truth, I wasn't sure of anything in this place. The rat king laughed again, and moved to stand directly in my path at the top of the stairs, blocking any passage down.

"Why are you going that way?" he said. "There is nothing down there for you but sorrow and loss—nothing to find but what you already know, nothing to see but what you've already seen."

"What choices do I have? Up here there is only stone and dust—that and your kind, trying to kill me."

He laughed again at that.

"I will admit, they can be a bit rowdy at times—this place will do that to a man after a while. But I can assure you that it is far better here than the alternative that faces you below."

"What alternative? Surely anything is better than this bleak emptiness."

"Where you see bleakness, I see beauty. It depends on your viewpoint," he said, as if we were having a chat over a cup of coffee in a café.

"I want no part in your kind of beauty," I replied.

"Be careful what you wish for, John. It is a bad habit to develop." The incongruity of standing here having a conversation with a huge winged rat was not lost on me as he spoke again. "Stay here and you shall have freedom. Go down, and you will have none."

I showed him the sword. It sent a burst of heat into my hand and the choir sang loud.

"I don't believe you. I believe this." I shook the sword in his face. "And if you do not stand aside, then I'll show you the depth of that belief."

My bluster did not seem to intimidate him in the slightest. Once again he laughed, louder this time, setting the stone walls around us ringing. The Burdens in the corridors above us squealed and chittered in seeming agreement.

"Just remember that I offered," he said. "And that the offer will still stand if you decide to return. Go ask your questions, go find your grail—just don't expect the answer you might expect. I'll be here waiting for you—if you make it. I won't say good luck, for luck has little to do with it here. But go well, John. May all your dreams be pleasant ones."

And with that enigmatic remark he broke into a waddling run, heading for the nearest window. I didn't have time to raise the sword before he took a headlong dive through the opening and out into open sky. The last I saw of him was as a soaring shadow across the yellow moon, wings wide as he whooped and hollered in the joy of his flight.

—Day 3—

The Burdens are at my back now, filling the stairwell with the press of their bodies and the stench of their breath. If the thought of fighting a score and more of them didn't give me pause, the smell certainly did. I can hear them, a floor above, chittering and chattering and laughing, too loud and too long. There has been no further sign of the Rat King, but if these are his subjects then his promises of freedom were strange in the extreme.

But I cannot give afford them any more consideration. They seem content to block my passage back to the heights, but as I have no intention of going that way, I can safely ignore them. Besides, I have other things to worry about.

I may not be as alone as I first thought, although whatever is here with me is not anything I can tell as human.

I first saw it on the twelfth floor of my descent; it seemed to be a tear in the fabric of space, no bigger than a sliver of fingernail. It appeared in the center of the chamber I had just entered. It floated at my eye level and span slowly in a clockwise direction. As I watched it changed shape, settling into a new configuration, a black, somewhat oily in appearance droplet little more than an inch across at the thickest point. It seemed to be held in mid-air by some strange force.

It looked most like an egg. As I stepped forward a rainbow aura thickened around it, casting the whole chamber in dancing washes of soft colors as it continued to spin.

The sword hummed, hot in my hand as I moved closer. The egg quivered and pulsed. And now it seemed larger than before. The chamber started to throb, like a heartbeat. The egg pulsed in time. And now it was more than obvious—it was most definitely growing. The sword sent a new flash of heat, like a searing burn in my palm as I lifted the weapon, but before I could strike the egg the throb became a rapid thumping; the chamber shook and trembled. The vibration rattled my teeth and set my guts roiling. A blinding flare of blue blasted all coherent thought from my head. When I recovered enough to look back there was nothing to be seen hanging there but empty space. The black egg was gone as quickly as it had come.

The Burdens up above shrieked in chorus, but whether it was a laugh or a scream I wasn't able to tell. I also could not tell what had just happened—it ran so contrary to anything in my experience that I had no frame of reference, no way of even starting to make sense of it. I could only head for the stairs, continue my descent, and hope that matters would eventually become clearer.

Seventeen floors down, with nothing untoward in the last five, and then it happened again. And this time there was a sense of something in development.

I saw it as I stepped down into a new chamber and walked away from the stairwell.

Two eggs now hung in the air side by side, just touching, each as black as the other, twin bubbles held in check by the dancing rainbow colors. The whole chamber throbbed like a heartbeat. The eggs pulsed in synchronized agreement and calved.

Four eggs hung in a tight group, all now pulsing in time with the throb. Colors danced and flowed across the sheer black surface; blues and greens and shimmering silvers that filled the chamber with washes of color. The heartbeat got louder. Soon there were eight, then sixteen.

I started to back away, back toward the stairs I had come down. The Burdens up above me squealed in delight, anticipating easy prey.

Thirty-two now, and chamber shimmered with dancing aurora of shimmering lights that pulsed in time with the heartbeat as the eggs calved again, and again, everything careening along in a big happy dance. I stepped forward. The sword screamed as I aimed a blow at the growing mass of eggs. I felt the strike all the way through my upper body, as if I'd just hit a wall. The rainbow aura seemed to breathe in, breathe out, twice. There was a sudden burst of color; red, blue and shimmering silver filled my head with a glare brighter than the brightest sun. I blinked, looked back, and the eggs were gone as quickly as they had come—there was only the empty chamber. But the damage had been done.

The floor buckled, threatening to throw me to the ground. A crack ran down the far wall from me. A portion of the roof collapsed, a block of stone the size of my head fell to the floor and immediately disintegrated into dust.

I headed for the stairwell down to the next level. The roof was threatening to come down around me as I threw myself down the stairs. A pall of dust fell behind me from the ruined chamber, but I quickly outran it, heading down at full pelt.

Even in my haste I smelled it—not the Burdens this time, but something I could recognize, something that gave me a foothold in this place—freshly cut grass, and flowers. The sword sent some soft heat into my palm and the bass choir sang—I almost recognized the tune.

High above, the Burdens squeal as I go down.

—Day 4—

It seems I have descended forever. The last time I looked out from a window I saw nothing but dense swirling fog. My feet pad along, kicking up swirls of previously undisturbed dust. Most of the time the footsteps are the only sounds, although every so often I hear the scratch of talon on stone, reminding me that the Burdens are still there above me, still following.

I am a dozen levels or more below the room that nearly fell in on me now—I stopped counting a while back—but I can't get the vision of those dancing black eggs from my mind. I am formulating an idea as to what they might be—where I might be. Back when I still worried about things like classes and teaching, I might have asked my students to think of them as soap bubbles. Scientists have conjectured that what we perceived as reality consists of many of them—multiple, maybe even infinite, universes, each in its own bubble, each connected by the thinnest of membranes to many of its neighbors. Quantum foam, if you like. Here, in this place, I preferred to think of them as possibilities—opportunities even. For if I had crossed over to here, where else might I be able to go? Might I even be able to go home if I could but crack open the right egg?

I am actually looking forward to my next encounter with the phenomenon—I need to study them. More than that, I have found a purpose, and my footsteps in the dust are just that bit quicker and more sure than they were earlier.

I still have not eaten, not slept. There is some compensation here—as I don't feel in the least bit tired, nor has there been any need to pish or shit, and I can't say as that's not a blessing. I am counting time only in what feels to me like days—there is no demarcation of night

and day here, and now that I am in the levels that sit in the fog there is not even the gibbous moon to tell me it might be nighttime.

There's just the descent, and my footsteps in the dust.

I go down.

—Day 6—

Just when I thought that my sword strike had done for the eggs forever, I had another encounter—and one that has changed the nature of my presence here.

The Burdens had grown more bold, and were only two yards behind me on a long run of steps that spiraled round the inside wall of a hollow chamber running down the center of the spire at these levels. As yet they showed no signs of pressing an attack; the sword stayed cool in my hand, and, besides, I had no time to worry about them. The drop in the middle channel was vertiginous in the extreme, making me dizzy just contemplating it, and I hugged the left hand side of the steps, my shoulder almost touching the wall as I made sure I was as far as possible from any fall. I was concentrating so hard on just moving one step down at a time that I didn't notice that the eggs hung in the center of the hollow space, already calving.

Sixty-four, each a shimmering pearl of black light.

The colors filled the whole turret, spilled out over the stairwell, crept around my feet, danced in my eyes, in my head, all though my body. I strained to turn my head towards the eggs. A hundred and twenty eight now, and already calving into two hundred and fifty-six. I was doing arithmetic in my head as they calved again, and again. By the time there were more than two thousand of them I was coming to the certainty that they would not stop—unless I stopped them.

The sword gave me a blast of fiery heat in my hand as I raised it. The spinning mass of eggs had now grown large enough to be within the reach of my arm if I stretched over the chasm. Four thousand and ninety six eggs spun and danced and seemed to mock my cowardice.

I took a hefty swing—one that almost overbalanced me, but I hit my target. An egg—one right at the edge of the group—popped. The swirling colors blazed in a flash of blinding light. The mass of eggs broke up and fell apart in wisps of black ash that drifted down and away into the depths. The Burdens squealed and took flight, bat wings fluttering like sheets in the wind in the middle column high above me, but I was blind and deaf to everything but the thing that now stood below me on the staircase.

It was impossible, here in this cold tower. But equally, here it was, a fifty-inch television set, tuned and broadcasting static despite it having no obvious power source. The picture coagulated and

congealed, the grays thickening until a crude picture showed, grainy and as if seen through thick fog—but all too familiar. A black haired girl climbed up out of an old stone well and came forward toward the screen. I knew that there would be wide, yet distinctly Asian, eyes under that veil of hair—just as I knew that if I let her crawl out of the screen, I might never be sane again. I stepped forward, bringing the sword around in a strike that I intended to smash into the TV. Just before it hit the scene sharpened and changed, a verdant wash of green lawn, yellow flowers, and a voice coming loud and clear—my Annie's voice, singing softly, the same lullaby she used to sing to me on those long empty days beside my hospital bed.

"Should somebody meet somebody,

Coming through the rye,"

I tried to pull out of the swing, overbalanced, and nearly tumbled into the depths, but even then I wasn't in time to stop the weapon cleave its way through the TV, which also fell apart into black ash, all too quickly gone.

"Annie?" I whispered.

Above me, the Burdens screeched.

I get it now—the eggs are indeed possibilities, but they are not places I can go—they are places I have been, and they too came with me when I came here, like the ever-present Burdens. They are my nightmares, and I shall have to defeat them, once and for all, for my Annie is there—right in the middle of them.

—Day 7—

Another level, another nightmare.

I finally reached the foot of the huge internal spiral staircase and found myself in an open, almost airy chamber some twenty feet high, with tall vaulted window openings. Once upon a time they might have looked out over the moon and dark seas below, but now there was only more of the swirling fog, so dense it almost looked like gray soup.

Instead the windows looked inward, to the center of the room, where eight eggs hung and spun, throbbing with a bass drone that was taken up by the choir in my head from the sword. The weapon send me another blast of heat as I stepped forward and, not waiting this time, struck the small group of eggs, hard, right in the center.

A blaze of light blinded me, and when my eyes adjusted he was there—as I said, another nightmare, and one of the oldest, a figure that had stood at the foot of my bed on more nights than I cared to remember.

A hood hung over the face obscuring the features in deeper

blackness. But there was no mistaking the tall scythe in his white, almost skeletal hand. The blade was near four feet long, gleaming, red as blood.

“I have come for what is mine,” the voice said. The robe hung in folds around his feet, making it seem as if he flowed forward in a single smooth motion. A high sickly stench of corruption hung in the air.

The sword sent a blast of such intense heat to my hand that I nearly dropped the weapon, but managed to raise it in defense in front of me.

“You cannot naysay me,” the figure said, and raised the scythe.

I was ready for its descent and blocked it with the sword held high. Sparks flew where the blades collided. Heat leeched from the room. Frost ran in spider-webs across the walls. My breath condensed in front of my face.

“You cannot naysay me,” the figure said again. “You too are mine.”

“Not this time,” I said. I gripped the sword tight. It sent a sheet of blue flame running along its length as I thrust the blade hard, deep into the folds of the robe.

A scream rent the air. Ice gripped every inch of my body and my sword arm went numb, like a cold stone.

“You cannot naysay me,” the voice said, but now it came from far off, like an echo in the hills. I could hold the sword no longer. It fell from my grasp. I followed it to the ground, but even as I fell I saw the scene above me.

Where the eggs had floated was now a diffuse patch of lightness, with sunshine seeping through. Once again I saw grass, smelled flowers. Once again Annie sang the old songs, and for a second I felt I could almost reach out and touch her.

"Should somebody meet somebody,
Coming through the rye,"

"Annie!"

Blackness took me.

—Day 8—

I woke out of blackness some time later. The right side of my body felt hot and burning, while the left was still cold. I heard crackling, fire on wood. I opened my eyes and found I lay on my back in front of the large fireplace. Someone had wrapped a cloak around me.

I tried to sit, but couldn’t find the strength.

“John?” a voice said softly. The Rat King bent over me, a smile

on his face. “I thought he had taken you for sure.”

I might have struggled, or just backed away, but I was rolled up tight in the confines of the cloak, and my hand was empty—the sword was no longer in my palm. I tried to speak, but only a hoarse whisper came out. I finally managed to roll myself out of the cloak and sat up slowly. My head felt light, as if a puff of wind would be enough to blow me away.

But I'm alive. For now.

The Rat King somehow caught my thought.

"Yes, John. You can die here. Again. Your reckless abandon was almost the end of you."

"I don't understand."

He laughed.

"No one ever does. It's the way the game is played. But you have seen your grail now, haven't you? You know what guards it. And you know what your choices are?"

I looked around me. I was still in the high vaulted room. The sword lay where I had dropped it on the stone floor, and the Rat King pointedly did not look in that direction.

"So I was right," I said. "I can go somewhere else?"

That got me another laugh.

"Haven't you go it yet?"

"Obviously not."

He smiled.

"Oh well, there's plenty of time. Are you sure you won't take me up on my offer? As much fresh air as you can handle, the freedom of the skies and no pesky nightmares?"

I wasn't even tempted. I was thinking about grass, and sunshine, yellow flowers and Annie's voice. My 'grail' he had called it.

And he saw the decision in my eyes. He sighed.

"Just don't let the scythe touch you. If that happens, it's all over bar the shouting and all deals are off. Some nightmares build strength with repetition, and that one has been feeding for a very long time." He stepped—more like waddled—away from me, and once again his talons tapped a military rhythm on the stone slabs. "I've asked you twice now. Third time is the charm—after that there's no going back. Go find your grail, and do with it what you will. You know where to find me when the time comes."

And with that he launched himself headlong at the tallest window and was out and away, lost in the fog in a second. I heard him after he vanished from sight; the fog quickly swallowed the sound as he let out a long whoop of joy in his flight.

When I stood, fetched the sword and made for the stairs heading down, a score of his brethren chittered and chattered excitedly just

above me.

I hear their talons scrape and tap on stone as they follow my descent once more.

—Day 9—

It gets darker. The gloom has been growing for several hours and the windows are fewer and further between, although even when I do find one and look outside the fog is black and thick, like oozing tar.

Today I met another nightmare—a teenage one this time, borne out of Hammer horror movies, young lust and poor choices in reading material. It started when I found four eggs spinning in the air just at the entrance to another chamber. I didn't even consider waiting—I struck with the sword, hard and fast, remembering to close my eyes against the flash of light that came immediately after the blow.

When I was just about able to see again, the eggs were gone and there was only darkness in the room beyond, a deep black that seemed sinuous and alive. It took long seconds for my sight to adjust, but as I stepped forward it was into a long hall. A high ceiling arched overhead, with heavy, dark-stained wood paneling on all sides. A massive stone fireplace dominated the far end of the room, and dark portraits of long dead knights, horsed and armored, lined the walls.

But it was the mosaic on the floor that drew my attention most. It was done in blood-red and black tiles, each no bigger than a fingernail, and it covered the whole floor—some thirty yards long. It was a serpent; a great, segmented, wurm with scales that flashed such that, even in the dim light, the serpent seemed to writhe and squirm.

“The old one knows you,” a voice said to my left.

I turned to face an enormous, bloated vampire. The thing was gorged with blood… so much so that its eyes leaked red and drips ran from its nose and ears. If it had been still a man it would have been over forty stone in weight, but I saw that it had left no tracks in the dust, as if it floated just above the floor. It wore a single long smock that covered it from neck to feet. The garment was covered in both wet and dry blood, and even at a distance of several yards the smell of it made gorge rise in my throat.

Perversely, it had paid great attention to its appearance above the neck. It wore a long white powdered wig that was combed and set in perfect ringlets. Its eyes were shadowed with mascara, and its cheeks were rouged and polished.

It stepped backwards as I moved toward it, the sword raised in front of me.

“Oh, you do not need that here,” it said. “Not among kin.”

“I am no kin of yours,” I said and stepped closer.

The vampire fluttered its arms in front of itself, like a wounded bird trying to escape a cat. It moved away from me. The great serpent on the floor seemed to writhe and squirm as I stepped onto the mosaic. The vampire initially looked shocked, then turned and ran. I jumped forward, but it was already far off down the next flight of steps. Its laughter echoed through the corridor as I chased. But no matter how fast I ran, I was unable to catch up as it seemed to fly down the stairwell.

Finally, after what seemed like an age of descent, I started to make headway, and was soon closing fast. I took the stairs two at a time and burst through into another chamber, almost within striking distance of it, only to be stopped dead in my tracks by the sight that awaited me.

I was in a bedchamber, one dominated by a huge ornate four-poster. A woman lay on the bed, on top of the covers. She had her head turned away from me, but she was blonde, and the right general size and shape.

"Annie?"

A guard stood at each corner of the bed; four ancient knights, each heavily armored with only their faces showing beneath thick iron skullcaps. Each rested their crossed palms on the hilts of heavy broadswords, and their eyes stared at me with a cold disdain. They did not move as I walked into the room.

“A newcomer should be more circumspect in a lady’s chambers,” the voice said.

I turned to my left. The huge bloated vampire stood by a cold empty fireplace.

“I refuse to take lessons in manners from such as you,” I replied, looking him up and down.

The fat one studied the blood and gore smeared over his clothing and smiled. “If I had known you were coming I would have made myself more presentable.”

I showed him the sword. “I fear you will not have long to worry about your appearance,” I said, and moved forward.

The guards finally moved. I just had time to get my sword in a defensive position as the first knight pressed an attack. I got caught off balance for a second, and that was enough for him to force me across the room so that my back was to the fireplace. Even as I fought, the three remaining guards moved to lift the woman from the bed. I parried a stroke from the knight that was heading for my heart, and stepped forward into the attack.

I realized immediately that I was faster, and stronger than he was. The knight realized it as well, and went on the defensive. I

understood his plan—he meant to hold me up while the woman was spirited away.

I had no time for niceties. The knight drew back his arm, and I stepped inside the stroke, giving him no room to swing. As he struggled to free himself I leaned forward and tore a bloody hole in his neck with my teeth. He stepped back in confusion and I took my chance. I turned sharply and brought my sword arm round in a flashing arc. There was still confusion in his eyes as his head bounced on the floor. I was out of the door and after the departing guards before the head stopped rolling.

The three guardsmen had reached the top of the next flight of downward stairs when I caught the rearmost of them by the neck and twisted, hard. The noise the spine made as it broke was loud in the sudden quiet.

The body fell at my feet, but killing it had given the remaining two a chance to prepare. The pair of them stood at the top of the stairs, their swords raised. Behind them I saw the girl. She stood perfectly still, her back to me, looking down the stairs.

"Annie!" I shouted, and jumped forward.

The knights were perfectly silent as they met my attack, but I was more than ready for them. I swung to the left, leaving one opponent's slash to cleave nothing more than thin air. The second one swung high, and, instinctively, I blocked it with my forearm, taking a deep gash in the muscle there as I punched my own weapon right through the armor and into the knight's heart.

He fell aside, and I turned fast, just in time to parry a blow that would have taken my head off had it connected. My new opponent pressed me, hard, in a flurry of steel clashes that kept me on the back foot. Over his shoulder I saw the bloated vampire take the woman's hand, leading her away.

"No," I shouted, and stepped into the attack. Metal clashed, sending white sparks flying. I left myself open to an attack, and took the knight's sword deep into my side. I leaned over and pulled his weight with me, heaving him off balance. A backhand chop from my own weapon nearly severed the head from the shoulders, and a second finished the job.

Barely pausing, I pulled the sword from my side and leapt toward the staircase. I caught the bloated vampire full in the back, punching my weapon completely through the body. I hit the heart. Blood poured in furious gouts, flowing down the staircase in a river of steaming gore.

"An unfair blow," the vampire said in a whisper, "I had thought better of you."

I started to reply, but it was too late—it was fully dead.

The woman turned to me.

"Annie," I said, and pulled her into my arms.

She looked up at me, bloody tears running down her cheeks.

It wasn't Annie—but I did know her. Janice somebody—I'd asked her out, back when I was watching all those bloody movies. She'd said no at the time—and it didn't look like my luck was any better now. White fangs slid from her bloody gums and she hissed like a snake as she made a lunge for my neck. I threw her away from me, back into the room.

The winged Burdens were there in the dark, waiting.

She didn't last long.

—Day 12—

I go down in darkness. The sword gives off a faint glow that lights the steps just at my feet, but I can't see anything beyond that small pool of illumination. There have been more eggs, more nightmares. I have fought the three blind men in black suits, the spider thing that hides in the corner, the red eyed goblin that lived in the toy cupboard, and the zombies that were all taking finals exams in the long hall at Glasgow University. But there have been no more glimpses of grass and sunshine, no sign of my Annie.

Any wounds I take heal within minutes. And I have remembered where my sword came from—I brought it here with me too, from a series of fantasy novels I read in the years just before those vampire movies took hold of me. Stormbringer is its name, and it has a black demon inside it—one that will suck my soul if I'm not careful, although sometimes on this endless descent into darkness I wonder if that has not already happened.

At one point—hours, maybe days, ago—I almost gave up. I sat on the steps in the dark with the sword in my lap, and I wept, long and hard. Above me the Burdens laughed and squealed, as if mocking me, and it was that laughter more than anything else that got me on my feet and moving again, down, always down.

I cannot give up hope. The grail—my grail—is down there somewhere, deep in the black, waiting for me. Annie is there.

I know she is.

She has to be.

—LATER: DEEP—

Time has no meaning here. I have given up even trying to mark its passing. But there may be hope—the nightmares of recent hours have all been relatively new ones, reminding me all too much of how

close my Annie must be.

I encountered sixty-four eggs at a bend in the stairwell, and the sword came up and struck them, hard, before I had scarcely noted their presence. Blazing light flared, a bass choir soared in a chord that seemed to go on forever, and I stepped forward into a place and time I'd rather forget.

The room was lit from somewhere high above, neon tubes humming and crackling, sending harsh shadows dancing across thirty small faces, all turned toward me. Their eyes were golden—that was another story from another place, something else I carried with me. I remembered the moment well—right in the middle of a section of MacBeth. David Martin, a thin, well-dressed child in the front row, was reciting Shakespeare.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,"

And that was when I'd felt it, a grumbling in my belly—the first sign.

And now, here in this spire of stone, I felt it all over again. The nightmare and my reality melted and fused and became one. David Martin looked up at me and grinned as he spoke.

"And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.
Out, out, brief candle!

My stomach moved, writhing with a life of its own, a life which spread across my torso, wriggling and spasming as it made its way to my throat. I tried to scream but my voice was blocked by the crawling mass. I gagged and coughed and it left me in a thick stream, my cancer made flesh. It lay there before me, coalescing into a mannequin, a black slimy parody of myself. It had my eyes.

It spoke to me.

"Like father, like son."

It was still laughing as I brought the sword up and around hewing and cutting until there was only an oily spread of slime on the floor.

When I looked up the children had all gone—if they had ever been there in the first place—and the light was already fading in the room, the black returning. Just before it went dark I saw soft greens, smelled flowers, heard Annie, still singing.

I go down again, my resolve renewed.

—LATER: DEEPER—

The sword is the only thing keeping me warm. The chill is

intense, and the blackness is thick, almost palpable, like moving through heavy velvet curtains. But the weapon sends a continual flow of heat that spreads from my palm to my whole body, and the bass choir hums in a constant drone that makes me feel, somehow, less alone, here in the dark.

The Burdens are still at my back, even closer now, emboldened by the lack of light, although none has yet come close enough for me to be able to take a swing at it. I can smell their stench though, hear their breath, and their chittering, high and shrill as if in counterpoint to the hum of the choir.

I must be close now—there is a new sense of tension in the air, and the eggs—along with the nightmares—are coming at closer and closer intervals. In recent hours I have walked, lost in the streets of a too large, too silent city; I killed a cave troll, I thrust my sword, deep, into a redheaded succubus and beheaded three slender, gray, big-eyed aliens.

Then there was the thing that persuaded me I was indeed getting close. Two hundred and fifty six eggs had just calved into five hundred and twelve when the sword went up and down, the light flashed, and I opened my eyes to look over an all too familiar doctor's office. It wasn't a doctor on the other side of the desk—it was the reaper again, the long hooded robe pulled down over his eyes, and a blood-red scythe leaning against the wall behind him. But when he spoke it was in the same deep, cultured tones I remembered the doctor using that day, and the same two words that I'll never forget.

"Six months."

They didn't quite have the same impact now that they had back then. I stepped forward, intending to raise the sword and cleave the reaper in two. He stopped me by waving his hand from side to side. The papers, computer and telephone on the wide mahogany desk disappeared, to be replaced by a chess set—ivory figures, winged rat-things on my side, reapers on his.

"Forgive the cliché," The cultured voice said from inside the hood. "But I need to get your attention. Do I have it?"

The sword sent me some extra warmth, but there was no flaring heat, no soaring choir. It seemed that danger was not imminent. I didn't move any closer, but I didn't raise the weapon either. I held my peace, hoping to learn something to my advantage. The hooded figure sighed, and started to make my moves for me—I recognized the opening—the Dragon variation.

The reaper reached up a too white hand and dropped back the hood. The head underneath was not quite skeletal, although there were no eyes—just black holes that seemed to sink back forever. Flaps of tattered skin hung over the scalp, and blackened lips, like old

leather, moved around a wet maw of a mouth in which a gray tongue slithered, like a fat maggot bloated on a meal.

"Do you like what you see? This is all I can offer you, if you insist on your current course of action."

"I don't believe you," I replied.

"And I don't give a shit whether you believe me or not," the reaper said, moving a knight to attack my queen. "Nonetheless, it is the truth. This is your last warning."

And, just like that, I was angry—angry at the skeletal monstrosity sitting behind the desk, angry at the fucker of a doctor who gave me my sentence, angry at a world that let it happen, angry at myself for dying. The sword seemed to agree with me. It flared, blazingly hot, and a wash of flame ran along its length as I raised it.

Despite the lack of flesh on the reaper's face, I knew a smile when I saw one. It reached behind it in one smooth motion and took up the scythe, sending blue sparks flashing from the wall. As it rose up from the desk, all appearance of being in an office faded, stone walls bleeding back in until we stood, face to face, in the darkness of a chamber in the spire, only the flames from my own weapon illuminating the scene.

The Reaper banged the haft of the scythe on the stone floor and the whole room rang like a bell. Somewhere above me the Burdens squealed in terror.

Then the fight was on. The scythe came straight for my neck, but the sword was ready for it. The weapon and my arm—my whole being—moved as one sleek unit, fused into a poetic ballet of fluid motion and strength.

The reaper didn't stand a chance.

The sword came up, went down, and the scythe burst apart in a thousand shards of glittering metal. The sword came up again, fire flaming along its length. Restless shadows flitted inside the empty eye sockets. The head looked up at the sword raised high above it.

"This is your last warning," I said, and started to bring the sword down.

The reaper turned and fled.

I chase him.

—LATER: DEEPEST—

We went down. Sometimes I saw him, just ahead of me on the stair, but mostly there was just me, the dim light from the sword, and the excited chitter-chatter of the Burden pack at my back.

There was frost now, making the steps slippery, but I was in no mood to slow my pace and I took them two, sometimes three at a time

with reckless abandonment. What harm could be done to me that hadn't already been inflicted? What new ravages could befall me that was any worse than the betrayal of my own body—the very thing that had brought me here in the first place? Besides, I was close now, close to my Annie. Every so often I'd see a lighter patch in the darkness far below—a hint of green and the wafted smell of fresh flowers—and Annie, my Annie, singing the old song. She had always sung the anglicised version, feeling awkward using the old Scots words, but the sentiment was the same in any language.

"Should somebody meet somebody,
Coming through the rye,
Should somebody kiss somebody,
Need somebody cry?"

I did indeed cry, hot tears that froze on my cheeks as I threw myself forward down the staircase.

"I'm coming, Annie. I'm coming."

The sword sent a blast of heat through my arm but I hardly noticed.

At the same moment that I caught up with the reaper, close enough to put the sword in his back if I wanted to, I came, finally, to the base of the spire. I took my last step off the staircase—out of the black, and into bright, almost stinging sunlight.

Somewhere a bass choir sang, accompanying Annie's high clear voice.

"Should somebody kiss somebody,
Need somebody cry?"

The light blinded me—I could not see the reaper, could not see much of anything at all but sunlight and greenery. I smelled fresh flowers, and let Annie's voice lead me forward, but her voice started to crack at the next line.

"Every lassie has her laddie,
None, they say, have I,"

I heard the sob in her voice, enough to break my heart. My vision started to clear as I stumbled forward.

"Don't cry darling," I said, as I started to make out figures—a group standing in a circle ahead of me, backs to me. As I got closer I saw why her voice had cracked.

I knew this place too—knew it far too well, for I visited most Sundays to lay flowers—fresh flowers—on my parents' headstones. The group of figures was standing around the same plot—and there was Annie, my Annie—looking down into a freshly dug grave as she sang. Off to her left the boys from the school choir stood in two ranks singing along. Danny Martin was crying too.

I stumbled closer. No one paid me any heed—I was invisible to

them—all their attention was on the coffin as it was slowly lowered into the ground.

"No!" I shouted. "I'm here. I'm still here."

Something answered from inside the coffin. Again, the gathered crowd didn't seem to notice. Annie managed to keep singing as the choir carried the tune for her, the sun kept shining and my friends all looked glum.

The noise from the coffin grew louder—another nightmare—too much Poe. Then I saw it—the shifting rainbow aura as the wood split to let it shine out—and the black, shiny eggs slithering into existence, already forcing themselves out and through the cracks.

The coffin rattled and rolled. Annie sang—then my burial box burst open, the blackness pouring out. I knew now what the eggs really were—my cancer, brought here with me, made flesh here with me; let out of its box and ravenous to feed.

The hole in the ground filled quickly—sixty four, a hundred and twenty eight, two hundred and fifty six—each cell a nightmare in its own right. I had to step back as the cancer started to ooze out over the grass. I stepped on an egg that encroached too close and it burst—an anxiety dream, late for work—then I had to dance back further as the eggs—thousands now, spilled over the mourners and the choir and the grass and the flowers, engulfing everything that was left of me.

I laid into the cancer with the sword, trying to reach my Annie. My nightmares popped and flowed around me—a dead cat in the street, driving on a four lane highway at speed without brakes or steering, the unicorn on the green hill that was my first remembered dream—none of them of any consequence against the surge of the cancer. It was a battle I was never going to win.

The last I saw was Annie's blonde locks as she went under, still singing.

"Every lassie has her laddie,

None, they say, have I,"

It was hopeless. I had fresh tears in my eyes as I backed off when faced with a wave of blackness—tens of thousands now, all spinning, all dancing. I felt stone at my heel and went up—one step, then two. The green was gone, the sun was gone—Annie was gone. There was no more grass or flowers, no more singing.

I turned and fled upward. The cancer surged.

It follows me.

—LATER: HIGHER—

The reaper was waiting for me again in the Doctor's office.

He had a new shiny scythe, the rainbow aura from the cancer

behind me reflecting in the blade as he brought it up and round in an attack.

"You have had your last warning," he said.

"As have you," I replied. The bass chorus swelled one last time, the sword gave me enough heat to start a furnace, and I thrust straight through what was left of the thing's face. The sword sucked hungrily as flame took the reaper's robe and started to burn. It seemed keen to stay, and I had no further use for it where I was going. I left the weapon there feeding and headed for the stairs.

The cancer seethed and roiled at my heels, black eggs spawning at a dizzying rate, filling the stairwells and chambers below me as I ran, full pelt, up and away.

—LATER: HIGHER—

It swallowed the four poster bed, it ate the portraits of the great knights and it swept along at my heels like an incoming tide as I ran over the mosaic of the great serpent. I reached the tall inner chamber with the spiral staircase and took to the steps just ahead of the cancer. I heard a screeching chitter-chatter from high above. I had thought that the Burdens had all fled, but a score or more of them swooped and soared up near the ceiling, as if riding thermals within the spire.

They did not seem in the slightest bit interested in either me, nor in the cancer, and I had no time to consider them. The cancer filled the area below me almost as fast as I could run. And now I had something else to worry about—a quick look back showed me that the eggs were eating away at the very structure of the spire itself. Fog showed through now in parts of the wall that had grown thin, and the steps felt unsteady beneath my feet, as if swaying in a light wind.

That light wind had turned into a stiff breeze by the time I reached the top of that long spiral. The Burdens screeched as the cancer swelled and surged, and they swooped, still squealing, into its embrace. By the time I left the chamber behind it was full to bursting point, and the cancer was already spilling up the steps at my heels again.

The floor bucked, hard, almost throwing me to the ground.

I didn't have much time left.

—LATER: HIGHER—

I burst out onto the parapet at the very top, all too aware that the cancer was not far behind but, more than that, the whole spire seemed to be on the verge of tumbling down around me as my sickness ate through it to the core.

The rat-king stood there, as if he had been waiting for me. He looked out over the view, to where the gibbous yellow moon hung above the black crags and the still sea.

"One day, my lad, all of this could be yours," he said, and laughed.

"There's no time for joking," I replied, casting a nervous glance at the doorway I had just come through. Rainbow aurora of lights danced in there—it wasn't going to be long before the cancer burst through and took command of the whole spire.

"Why such a rush?" he said in that same comic high voice.

"You made me an offer," I replied. "I think I am ready to take it."

"Probably a wise choice," he said as the cancer bubbled up at the doorway. "You found your grail then?"

I nodded.

"And I'm ready to serve its keeper."

"Come then," the Rat King said. He took a running jump off the parapet and with a whoop of joy soared away high above.

The doorway filled behind me, my sickness offering to take me away—but I wasn't ready—I might never be ready. With a yell I wasn't sure was fear or joy I threw myself off the spire just as the cancer bubbled and oozed over the very topmost part.

I opened my wings as the leap threatened to turn into a fall, and, as with the sword on my arrival, they felt like they had always been a part of me—and in some ways, I think they have.

I soared high above as the spire was taken, collapsing in on itself into a bubbling mass of black ooze that flowed away to the depths, tumbling, lost, into the fog below.

—NOW: HIGHEST—

I soar, under a yellow moon that calls out to me. Some time soon I will go higher, but for now, there is too much to see, too much to do.

I soar.

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